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Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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A DESTINY: BUT WHY WAS IT MINE?

By Jacob Fishkin

Translated by Eva Zeitlin Dobkin

On May fifth, 1945 the death camp Ebensee was liberated by the American forces. I was one of the living dead who was freed there. The first thing on my mind was to find my father, but he was not in the vicinity of the camp. I decided to search through the Displaced Persons (D.P.) camps for him and other members of my family.

As soon as I was able to cover my bones with some flesh, I traveled to Linz, a city in Austria, in which there was the Jewish D.P. camp, Bindermekel. I stopped at a station called Atnang-Pakenheim, where I found large numbers of hurrying people.

After nearly four years in eleven concentration camps, it felt wonderful to be free to go anywhere I wished. As I moved about, feeling lost in the throng of people, someone tapped me on my shoulder and I heard a man's voice calling my name: "Yankev!"

At first I thought that this must be some crazy joke. Then I said to myself, "Could it be my father?"

I turned around and saw a familiar face, but could not place it. He was from my shtetl, Rubzewicz. His name was Benyomin and he was a former neighbor of ours. His family lived across the street from mine and my sister Sarah was a close friend of his sister Masha. In her diary, Sarah wrote about Masha.

After much hugging, and crying for joy and sadness, Benyomin told me that the only survivors of my large family were my mother's sister Rokhl, her husband, and their two children. Benyomin then added:

"Your aunt has your sister's diary. She will tell you all about it. You Must go to Fernwald, in Germany. That is where they are now."

Rokhl was my mother's younger sister. Of the seven children in their family, all but Rokhl perished. Her husband's name was Yankl and their sons were Arye and Benyomin.

It was 1946. My first Passover as a newly liberated free young man. I arrived at Rokhl's home just in time for the Seder. (I had to sneak across the German border to reach my aunt.)

Now all five of us were sitting together celebrating the Seder ritual- the Passover ritual dinner.

It was a very emotional moment when Rokhl brought out my sister's diary and placed it on an empty chair next to mine. There was no way we could stop crying, no matter how much we tried.

And then the story of "A Destiny: But Why Was It Mine?" unfolded.

How did it all come about? My aunt Rokhl began the story:

The first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the car was the cold. It was a sharp contrast to the warm blanket I had been sitting under. I looked up at the sky, which was a pale, hazy blue. The air was still, and the only sound I could hear was the distant hum of traffic.

I took a deep breath and walked towards the building. The architecture was modern, with large glass windows that reflected the light. I felt a sense of anticipation as I approached the entrance.

The receptionist at the desk smiled at me and handed me a set of keys. I walked down a long, brightly lit hallway. The walls were white, and the floor was polished. I felt a sense of calm as I walked.

I reached the door and unlocked it. The room was large and airy, with a high ceiling and a view of the city. I felt a sense of relief as I stepped inside.

I walked to the window and looked out. The city was a mix of old and new, with historic buildings and modern skyscrapers. I felt a sense of wonder as I looked out over the city.

I turned back and looked at the room. It was a beautiful room, with a large bed, a desk, and a view of the city. I felt a sense of peace as I looked at the room.

I walked to the door and unlocked it. The room was a beautiful room, with a large bed, a desk, and a view of the city.

I walked to the door and unlocked it. The room was a beautiful room, with a large bed, a desk, and a view of the city.

When the liquidation of Dworetz began, Rokhl, her husband and their boys
hid in a camouflaged double wall built by our townsmen.

"After the massacre, we emerged from our hiding place

And into the darkness of night

To find our way into the woods was our aim,

There to hide from the Germans.

We found many more Jews in the woods

And with them we immediately began to plan

How to remain alive.

Our decision: we must hurry home. Home to our shtetl.

We trudged through the woods by day and night.

With no food or drink to facilitate our journey

Until we were once again in Rubzewicz.

But, alas, there was no Jew in sight.

Without much thought we went back into the night

We must go, back into the woods:

To become partisans now seemed the right thing to do.

What we needed we were able to obtain

And there among the sheltering trees we found

people like ourselves.

There were trenches ready for us

And we erected an earthen chamber."

"To our trench came the command

Quietly, creating no fuss,

Back to Rubzewicz we had to go,

When the machine is in the "off" position, the motor will stop.

The motor will stop when the "off" button is pressed.

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To locate the Germans."

Silently, Rokhl entered our old dwelling

And there, in the rubble,

She discovered Sarah's diary.

"I encountered no Germans in the town,

And promptly started to march back to the forest.

In a dark, wet area I found a shelter and paused briefly.

I escaped many raids on my way,

At all times keeping the diary

Strapped to my body.

Between battles, the Jewish partisans,

Heroic fighters from various bunkers,

Read Sarah's writings, turning the pages,

Touched by her words. For they provided sustenance,

Raising our spirits, urging us not to lose hope

And faith in our God."

The Passover table was set.

The lovely Rokhl, gentle mother, rose

To light the candles and recite the blessing.

The four questions were asked:

"How does this night differ from all others?"

The Passover night we shall read two Haggadahs.

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The first, Exodus from Egypt,
Then, the Exodus from Europe.
We'll speak of God's miracles
Right here in this Hitler land,
of the modern Pharaoh, slayer of Jews.
The Pharaoh of long ago deserved his end,
Earned it for enslaving our people
And drowning our children.
He plagued his subjects with abscesses,
And the mighty Egyptian was engulfed by the sea.
once again God, performed His miracle,
And parted the sea to free His people.

He prepared a home for His people,
And started to lead us there

Through hill and dale and whirling winds,
Through hot days, cold nights and sand storms.

In the vast emptiness of the ~~forest~~ ⁷⁷³⁷
He found water and manna for us.
Up to Mount of Sinai did He lead us
And presented us with the Holy Torah.

He led us home to our land,
A sweet and lovely place
Flowing with milk and honey.
A land of beauty and splendor

Built by prophets and kings,
By high priests and by ordinary people
Who lived and laughed
And to remember their Lord in Heaven they soon forgot.

The father, angered by His children,
Sent them forth from the Holy Land
Dispersing them to the four corners of the earth,
And there they toiled for men of wealth.

"Yes, for their sins He punished them,
But never did He forsake them," Rokhl reminded us.
The refined, patient Jewish mother raised Sarah's diary
And began to turn its pages.

"Here is a poem by my sister, Shoshke, Sarah's mother. She wrote it when she was a leader in the **Bund** organization. Shoshke passed the poem on to her daughter, Sarah. And so it became part of the diary. It is called "Oh, take not,". Yankev, our guest, our child, will read it to us. But now, we shall all participate in reading the **Haggadah** of the Exodus from Europe, where we all were enslaved by the German pharaoh.

I read: "Oh, take not from me my silvery dream
But let me drown my sorrows in its gleam.
I have tasted no joy in reality...
In dreams, then, let forgetfulness come to me!
Oh, let me spin out my fancies of silver!
In dreams let my spirit run free.

With no space in my life for my desire ...

At least let me dream and, dreaming, expire!"

"God punished the Pharaoh of Egypt," continued Rokhl, "and those events have all been recorded. A new Pharaoh arose to lead the Germans, and their goal was to destroy all Jews. With aircraft, ships and with tanks that churned the earth. As they roved about, the Germans conquered and enslaved many nations and set about annihilating the Jews."

"God did not allow the murderous Hitler and his Nazis to go unpunished, but visited new plagues upon them. A horde of bird-like flying machines of strong metal burst through the skies, blocked the sun and panicked Germans. Clusters of bombs rained down, devastating cities and villages. Mighty dams were shattered and loosed, leaving raging waters to inundate field and forest-causing hunger and need among the Germans. Their mighty armies were drowned in blood or taken prisoners. Hitler, their Fuehrer, took his own life. His henchmen were hanged like **Hamans**. Thus did God punish the German pharaoh. All of this has been written into the records of the Nuremberg trials, lest the world forget."

A tear adorned her lovely face

And a smile appeared on her lips

When Rokhl began to recite Sarah's prophecy

Of Thursday, July twenty-fourth, 1941, in Rubzewicz:

... "We Jews do not despair. The prayers will reach the King of Kings and He will put an end to the terrible suffering of His tormented people. Some day the future may brighten and joy will pave the road across the Jordan and into Eretz Yisroel."

"Yes, many will fall, there will still be many more trials and much blood shed by Jews, but we shall survive that too. The Jews shall emerge victorious and Truth shall bare all

Then Rokhl turned to another entry:

"Wednesday, 29th April 1942

... Every blade of grass has a mother, every leaf is cradled in the comforting arms of the wind, but no blade of grass and no leaf is ever cuddled as long against a warm mother's breasts as is the deep, shadow-filled green of the woods in that Eastern land,- our land, where the sun shines. There, people live free and, happily even now. There the waters irrigate the fertile black fields. There, the budding fruit glistens before one's eyes; and the lovely golden sheaves change color as one looks at them bring joy, nourishment and fill one with much pride. The hearts of thousands of those still alive in the dark Diaspora strain towards that land. The children who remain long for that earth. The tortured, plagued and scorned Jews strive to reach the breast of that mother. We are parched from suffering. Our eyes are drained of tears as we await the amelioration of our plight.,

Rokhl continued her second Passover account:

"Once again the Heavenly Father
 Performed His wonders and led His people home.
 From the four corners of the earth
 He gathered His children
 And brought them home on wings of steel.
 From ghetto prisons, camouflaged cellars, Siberian cold,
 From dense woods and Christian cloisters,
 From homes of gentiles where they hid--
 Jewish soldiers from partisan trenches,

Wounded Jewish fighters and sound ones

From gentile lands--

Battle weary, they climbed mountains

And rode mules.

Ships, barely able to stay afloat

Running blockades on the rolling seas

To return people to their homes

To fight for and to build our land."

Rokhl wiped a tear from her face,

And combed her wavy hair.

Her table was set with fruits and flowers,

matzoth, sweet **charoses** and bitter radish,

And crystal glasses filled with wine.

We ate and drank, sang the song of the one Kid,

And praised our Father in Heaven.

Elijah's cup was filled. The door opened

For the Prophet to enter.

Once again, we welcomed him with song:

Eli.yohu hanavi,

Eli.yohu hatishbi ...

Long into the night the Seder continued

And then it was time for repose.

Rokhl, however, could find no rest.

Softly, on tiptoe, waking no one,

She came to where I lay.

"Dear Rokhl, as you see, I cannot rest.

I must tell you of the miracles that kept me alive."

"Tell me, tell me, child," she whispered gently.

Night was almost gone when Rokhl once again

Opened the diary

Tenderly, she turned its pages.

"One entry of Sarah gives me no solace,

Keeps robbing me of sleep.

I'd like you to read that page to me."

(The curtain was drawn, the lamp lit.)

"The date was March twenty-sixth, 1942

And this is what she writes:

"Who can tell what will happen to my diary?"

I read:

"Thursday, 26th March, 1942

From Today, there is one week to Passover

And praise be to God for his mercy, for He has kept us alive through yesterday and today and we pray He continues to perform miracles for us. These days bring with them serious problems. A great many lives are at stake. People rush to the houses of prayer crying out and imploring Him to turn away the baleful tide of

despair. Everyone seems to have lost their heads. No one sees the bright sun. All one can perceive and imagine is the sinister end to our lives. We see before us a long, deep ditch waiting to receive us. We recognize our enemies, and their delight in our grief. They laugh and find our sadness amusing. It is as if someone were cutting our hearts with a dull saw. We stay indoors, afraid to go out into the street. Ah! How sad is our plight, how tragic that we contemplate the imminent end of our lives. Who can tell whether we'll live to greet the next morning's tomorrow or even be able to think about anything? It is even futile to prepare for Passover, seven days hence. Who knows what will happen during the interim. Perhaps we shall live and overcome our travail. But closer to our thinking is the unbearable wait for death.

"Ah, Death! How everyone fears and despises you! We would normally welcome you with outstretched arms if you came for us while we slept. That end would be good.

"But it is deplorable when you are called upon to take our few remaining Jews. That is Hitler's and the Devil's final solution. And You, Almighty one, remain silent and do not rescue Your children.

"By now, few have the strength to endure. And who can remain indifferent to such an ugly demise? Life is so beautiful when there is no reason to contemplate an early death. When happy thoughts are dominant, there are only minor troubles to cope with. Why can't we lead normal lives and not cling to memories of the past, achieve our goals and approach our seventies alive? Yes, I am writing! Am I still living? Do I still function? Is my heart still beating and my youthfulness still apparent? Am I a normal being, still able to write? And are these, in truth, my final hours? I continue to write as I think: Who knows what will happen to my beloved diary? Where, dear diary, will some ill wind scatter

your pages tomorrow from the one who loves you? Who else will guard and treasure you as I do? You, too, will meet your end. You will probably be destroyed. Who will remember an eighteen-year-old who lived, and for a long time, almost seven years, recorded her various experiences? No one will even breathe a sigh for her. But you, my inscribed bits of paper, soaked through with bitter tears, will yearn and moan. But no! I shall not desert you, leave you to be abandoned in the fields where passerby who will pick you up, will then throw you away, or use you for personal needs. I shall not treat you that way. Nor shall I throw you into a fire that will consume you while I watch and weep. If I am still in control of my faculties, I will take you with me into the black grave of thousands, where you will rot along with me and all the others. Oh, how my heart pounds and aches at such thoughts, to prove that I am still alive and able to move and write about the final days of my life and all my Jewish brothers and sisters. Yes, how pained and bitter I feel as I speak to you, my unwritten page, and deplore your fate. And why do people not rue the fate of the many living?

Why do so few care about our rapid, unnatural decline? Why does no one exert any effort to ameliorate our situation? Yes, the world is very bright, but what I see in it is only darkness, impenetrable fog and a sense of finality, sealed forever in a stygian mass grave.

"I can write no longer; I'm unable to move my hand. I feel that my heart which cannot bear such sad, final scenes, is gradually failing..."

"During these remaining few days I should like to talk with all of my acquaintances, to hear human speech, listen to a few words of comfort which might help to heal my thirsting soul. Sadly, no one speaks of any improvement. No one utters words of solace or of protest against our dying. All are silent, and everyone

weeps. Each is aware of the abnormality present in his or her pulse and heartbeat. Wild ideas surface, everything is de trop, one regards matters with a despairing and unfocused eye. Then we realize that Summer is approaching and all the little blades of grass will begin to sprout and strain to maintain life. All the icy waters will melt and the glorious sun will shine. Events will proceed in a normal manner. Once the thick layer of ice is gone, the fields will be covered by beautiful verdure. But where will we be? We will have been cut down, hurled alive and wounded into the pits. The ground will heave as black earth is freed by the shovels to cover us. And that will become our sunshine, springtime and our liberation. The sun's rays will beam on our graves.

"Oh, God! Thou who-sees and knows all. Why not destroy the evil plans of our foes, dissipate their cruel sadistic plans and permit us to go on living? Spare us Father. Punish us for our transgressions, but not too harshly. Or--judge us Thyself and punish us all by Thine own hand. We are Your children. Thou did deliver us from Egypt. In the spirit of the approaching Passover which reminds us of that historic event, deliver us now, once again from the terrible fate our enemies would visit upon us. I end my confession in the fervent hope that Thou may be merciful and grant our desire to survive. Some day I may happily read all of this to my brothers and recall the terrible time when our collective deaths were imminent...."

A smile appeared on my aunt's sad face as she turned to me and spoke:

"Your experiences and mine, dear child, are closely related to Sarah's diary. We survived, not because we were stronger, better, wiser or more pious than all the many unfortunates. No. We live because it was, and is, our destiny to see to it that Sarah's writings endure."

"Sarah was not the strongest among us, but she was the most religious, one of the worthiest of God's children. Up until the time she perished so tragically, she was deeply rooted in Jewishness and Godliness. Each word, each page of her writings is steeped in Jewish suffering, filled with deep love for our Holy Land."

"The greatness of God is woven into her **Agudah** talks, as is her love for His people. Not only did she speak of how she felt, she recorded it in her diary. She poured her deepest, innermost thoughts onto the pages of her beloved day by day accounts. She recorded her prayers. She desired and demanded justice for her people. She wrote of the sun, the moon and of the earth and its beauty. She conversed with the birds that sing and with the winds that howled, and asked them and her dead grandfather for a blessing. No, not for herself. She requested it for all of God's weary children."

"So you see, my child, God did read her secret feelings and He saved her diary from destruction."

"But He needed a messenger to find and protect the diary. Now, let us analyze how that was done.

"Your sister Yentl disappeared during the early days of the war, and as you know, your mother wept bitterly. When her two little ones, Yitskhok and Merre-Libbe, were taken from her in Ivenietz, she grieved until she became ill.

"Finally, when you and your father were separated from her, she lost her will to live. She died three days before Rosh Hashanna. That left Sarah alone, and that was more than she could bear. When the Germans surrounded the camp, I pleaded

with her to come with us to the camouflaged hiding place. At least we would be together."

"But Sarah did not heed my pleas. She absolutely refused to accompany us. "I'll share the fate of all the other Jews", she said. That was her wish, and that is what happened.,,

"As you see, my family survived. If my husband and children had been taken from me, I, too, would not have wanted to remain alive. But our Heavenly Father had other things in mind. He saved my family and led us back to Rubzewicz. He brought us into your house where, unawares, I picked up a copy book from a pile of trash. That was your sister's diary. Inside was a photograph of the pupils and teachers of her organization, "Bnos Agudas Yisroel" [Orthodox Daughters of Israel]. Now, I ask: was it not God's will that Sarah's words, be preserved?"

"True, the Almighty needed messengers. At the time, I was the one closest to Sarah, so I was chosen. I am the one to fulfill His assignment. I cherished the diary and carried it with me wherever I went, through many trials and tribulations, protecting it from rain and all other dangers.

"Indeed, as I see it, the diary was my salvation. Then you came to Germany and wrote to me explaining how you found me. That was when my assignment was completed."

"For, all along, the Almighty was readying a second emissary: you. However, you would not have survived without help. You needed someone close to you. God therefore obtain a third messenger, and that was your father, Dovid."

"Now, is it not interesting?" she continued. "You desperately needed your father for many reasons, and vice versa. Let's consider this first example: When the two of you went to Wlozozin to get Sarah, you and your dad encountered the partisans. They mistook your father for a spy and were about to shoot him. It was only your crying and screaming that convinced them that he was really your father, and that they should let him go. On that occasion your father needed you to save his life."

"Here, now," she added, "is an example of a time when you needed your father's help: In the concentration camp not far from Lublin, you were standing near the chimneys one day. Your cousins Reuven and Godl were urging you to leave the train and come along with them, while your father wanted you to stay on the train with him. None of you knew which was the better choice. All the thousands who were there had gone to the area where the chimneys were, because they thought they were going to work in factories. Your father sensed it was not so. Once again God needed some one to point you in the right direction. That man was your father."

"Those were only two instances. Just think: You were in no fewer than eleven camps, in three--not quite four--long years, on death row, and you survived. Isn't that miraculous?" She closed her eyes and rested for a while. Then, once again, she turned some pages of the diary, stopping at the entry for May sixteenth, 1942. Only the date had been entered. There was nothing more on that page."

"Curious," said Rokhl. "It was during the fifth month, May, 1942 that we were driven from our homes and brought to Dworetz, where Sarah died. On May fifth, 1945 you were liberated from the death camp at Ebensee, Austria."

"So you see my child, you are not through with these paragraphs. It is your destiny to salvage Sarah's writings in perpetuity. True, your sister's young life was shortened, but her beloved diary will live on."

"Sarah entered a new date, but we could not continue, for we were driven, filled with fear and confusion, from our homes. She believed that we were about to be shot, so she hurriedly decided to leave the diary with your grandmother."

It must have been my destiny to survive because someone close to Sarah had to live if the purpose of continuing the saga- conceived at the tender young age of eleven and interrupted at eighteen-, was to be fulfilled. It had to be her younger brother, whom she loved, at times admired, and sometimes hated, it had to be someone who could open the diary and enter important details, episodes in our household, discussions on many matters in which we all participated --details no one else would know and to which Sarah did not refer although they were what influenced her young mind and heart.

Yes, it is my destiny. It was left for me to be the instrument through which Sarah's good words and deeds would be spread. I'll do it as long as my strength endures, and when it is gone, the younger generations of the family will carry the torch of our heritage. They will see to it that every Jewish child between the ages of eleven and eighteen studies Sarah's writings as exemplified in her diary, one that will become an integral part of their lives. It will become a source from which Jewish children will glean an understanding of Jewish martyrdom and its impact on the world.

Yes, they will have something to guide them after their school days are over. And they will covet it because Sarah's writing was a gift from God who gave her life and then took it away at such a tender age.

Fate has decreed that I carry on even though I find it difficult to write, knowing full well that I am not a capable practitioner of that craft. It was not easy for me to save enough money to pay for translating the diary from Yiddish into English, but I did it. I did manage to do it.

At this point my task is only partially accomplished. Now new aids are required to spread the message of the diary throughout the world. As time passes, those of us who were witnesses and victims of the Holocaust will be gone and there is a danger that many, even among our Jews, will know little about that cataclysmic era. It is, and will continue to be, important that at least all Jewish children, be acquainted with the facts about that tragic period.

Sarah's diary can become a significant part of such instruction. Moreover, it should have a special appeal for young people because it was written by a teenager at a time she was actually experiencing the tribulations about which she wrote, unlike many other accounts, written from memory years later. Every Jewish child's life will be enriched by this diary.

Once that is accomplished, it will not be difficult for me to leave this world. Then I shall take Sarah's hand and tell her that the wind did not scatter the pages of her story. The diary was well bound. I will tell her about all the helpers God prepared, and about how Aunt Rokhl found her book.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the car was the cold. It was a sharp contrast to the warm blanket I had been sitting under. I took a deep breath and felt the crisp air fill my lungs. The sun was shining brightly, and the birds were singing. It was a beautiful day, and I was finally out of the house.

I had been sitting in the car for an hour, waiting for the car to start. The engine was finally running, and I was on my way. I felt a sense of relief and freedom. The car was moving, and I was finally out of the house. I was finally out of the house.

As the car moved forward, I felt a sense of purpose. I was finally out of the house, and I was finally out of the house. I was finally out of the house, and I was finally out of the house. I was finally out of the house, and I was finally out of the house. I was finally out of the house, and I was finally out of the house.

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I will inform her that among God's many heralds entrusted to spread her message, was a president of the United States, Ronald Reagan. In a speech he delivered at a cemetery in the German city of Bitburg, one heard and read around the world, he quoted your words, Sara, although he had no knowledge of your diary.

Then I'll let her know that all of her prophecies were fulfilled. The German Pharaoh was crushed. God is bringing His children home, as Sarah predicted. Many Jews will emigrate to Israel. Yes, your prognostications have come true, Sarah, including the one that the world would not believe what happened to our people. But your diary will bear witness and will serve as evidence. I did, indeed, experience the seven stages of hell but I survived.

Mother used to say we would beseech the Almighty to keep at least one member of our family alive. And that destiny was mine, I shall tell Sarah.

Glossary

1. Agudah- a religious organization- and political party- founded in Poland between the World Wars.
2. Bund- the Jewish socialist organization as it was known in Europe
3. Charoses- a sweet food served during the ritual meal (called the "seder") on Passover eve
4. Eli yohu...-. A song in Hebrew about the prophet Elijah
5. Eretz Yisroel- the Land of Israel
6. Haggadah- the book which is read during the seder on Passover eve
7. Haman(s)- an enemy of the Jews who wanted to destroy the Jewish people, but was himself destroyed

I will report to the board of directors on the progress of the work done during the past year. I will also report on the financial condition of the company and on the results of the operations. I will also report on the progress of the work done during the past year.

The first part of the report will be on the progress of the work done during the past year. I will report on the progress of the work done during the past year. I will also report on the financial condition of the company and on the results of the operations. I will also report on the progress of the work done during the past year.

The second part of the report will be on the financial condition of the company. I will report on the financial condition of the company. I will also report on the results of the operations. I will also report on the progress of the work done during the past year.

1. The first part of the report will be on the progress of the work done during the past year.
2. The second part of the report will be on the financial condition of the company.
3. The third part of the report will be on the results of the operations.
4. The fourth part of the report will be on the progress of the work done during the past year.
5. The fifth part of the report will be on the financial condition of the company.
6. The sixth part of the report will be on the results of the operations.
7. The seventh part of the report will be on the progress of the work done during the past year.